



Feature Novelets

TIME STOPS TODAY

by John Wyndham 12

This wasn't the end . . . but four people were suddenly isolated, alone, as no human beings had ever been before . . .

TESTAMENT OF ANDROS

by James Blish 70

Here is an utterly strange story of Doom, one you may rate the best, or the worst, but one you will not forget quickly!

Novelet, Short Stories and Departments

DOWN TO EARTH (Editorial comment and Readers' Letters)	6
THE COMPLEAT COLLECTOR	H. B. Fyfe 27
Medford's manners and general appearance were most mild; but he wasn't easily pushed-around; a bill-collector has to be tough!	
MINORITY DECISION	Bruce Walton 39
There was no place in this world for the elite . . . and the elite wanted out!	
REMEMBERED WORDS (Announcing those who have won Originals)	48
We'd appreciate your making your selections as soon as possible!	
HYPNOTISM: Fact Vs. Fiction (Article)	Leo Louis Martello 49
IN THE BEGINNING (Novelet)	Damon Knight 53
The very idea of intelligent matter was so patently absurd..	
INCIDENT IN IOPA	Richard Wilson 67
He had to send the message out . . . but efficiency would be fatal!	
READIN' AND WRITHIN' (Book Reviews)	Robert W. Lowndes 85
THE RECKONING	98
We counted your votes, and calculated, and here's how it came out.	

Cover by Milton Luros, symbolizing the distortions of "Testament of Andros"

Interior Illustrations by Milton Luros and Paul Orban

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I threw the contents of the can at the transparent wall. It was queer the way the stuff splattered suddenly in mid-air . . .

TIME STOPS TODAY

Feature Novelet
by John Wyndham

It wasn't war; it wasn't cosmic catastrophe. But two couples woke up one morning to find that their houses and a part of the grounds had suddenly been cut off, isolated. And beyond the invisible barrier that closed them in. .



PERSON waking should, in my opinion, glide smoothly back into co-ordination; otherwise he feels that there is some part of him that hasn't got back in time.

And if there's another thing I dislike, it's the sharp drive of a woman's elbow—well, come to that, anybody's elbow—among the ribs, more particularly if that woman happens to be my wife. After all, it's part of a wife's job to learn not to do these things.

In the circumstances my response came clear out of the subconscious.

"Well, really...!" said Sylvia. "I know I'm only your wife, George, but—well, really...!"

My time-lag caught up. "Sorry," I said. "But, damn it...! What's the matter, anyway?"

"I don't know," Sylvia admitted; "but I've got a feeling that there's something wrong."

"Oh, Lord!" I said, and switched on the light. Naturally, everything looked just as usual. "Intuition?" I suggested.

"You needn't sneer at me, George. What about that Sunday I knew we were going to have an accident with the car?"

"Which Sunday? There were so many."

"Why, the Sunday we *did* have one, of course; I felt just the same way about it as I do now."

I sat up in bed. The clock had been a wedding present; after a while I calculated that it was trying to indicate 3.15 a.m. I listened; I couldn't hear anything, any place. Still, you know what intuition is.

"I suppose I'd better have a look. Where did you think it was?" I asked her.

"What was?"

"Whatever you heard."

"But I didn't *hear* anything. I told you—it's just a feeling that something's wrong."

I relaxed and leaned back on the pillow. "Would I do something about that?"

"What can you do? It's just a feeling."

"Then why on earth...?" I began.

At that moment the light went out.

"There!" said Sylvia, triumphantly; "I knew!"

"Good. Well, that's over then," I pulled up the bedclothes.

"Aren't you going to look at it?" she inquired.

"A blown fuse can keep till morning—even if you'd not left my torch some place," I told her.

"But it may not be a fuse."

"To hell with it," I muttered, getting comfortable again.

"I should have thought you would want to *know*," she suggested.

"I don't; I just want to sleep."

•

WHEN I WOKE again the morning was nice and bright. The sun was shining in, and painting a part of the opposite wall with pale gold. I stretched a bit in warm comfort, and reached for a cigarette. As I lit it, I remembered the light. I pushed the switch on and off a few times, without result. That cute electric clock still seemed to be saying 3.15; my watch said 7 o'clock. I lay back, enjoying the first few puffs at the cigarette.

Sylvia slept on. I allowed the temptation to drive *my* elbow into *her* ribs for a change to pass; she manages such a decorative and confiding appearance when she sleeps. Just then she said "Ugh-h-huh," and pulled the sheet over her ear; she is not one who greets the dawn with a glad cry.

At about the same moment, it occurred to me that there was something wrong with the day—a sort of background buzz of traffic from the main road—an occasional car in our own road, milk bottle clinking, and feel a general sense of stir. This morning all that was missing—even the bird-sounds; a disturbing air of peace lay over the neighborhood. The more I listened, the more unnatural it seemed. At length it drove me to get up and go to the window. Behind me Sylvia said, "Hell!" and pulled the bedclothes more closely round her.

I think I must have stood looking out of the window for several minutes before I turned back. Then I said: "Sylvia. Something funny's been happening."

"Ugh," she remarked.

Dropping the understatement, I continued, "Come and look. If you

don't see it, too, I must be going crazy."

The tone of my voice got through to her. She opened her eyes. "What is it?"

"Come and look," I repeated.

She yawned, pushed back the covers, and maneuvered off the bed. She thrust her feet into a pair of mules decorated, for some incomprehensible feminine reason, with feathers, and pulled on a wrap as she staggered across.

"What...?" she began. Then she shut up, and stood, staring.

WE LIVE in a suburb; it's a nice suburb, nice sort of people. The houses are pretty much alike, all with their garages and gardens. Not large houses—not large gardens, either, though quite large enough for the husbands to look after. We stand on a slope, and from the bedroom window we look down upon the backs of a similar row of houses which front upon a road parallel to ours and have gardens running up towards us. The end of our garden is separated from the end of the one opposite by a high wooden fence, which is continuous along all the properties. Across the roofs of the opposite houses we can see the huddle of more industrial parts beyond.

On fine days, we can see a considerable distance further to low hills—where houses similar to our own stand out among trees and gardens; but more often, the two residential areas are hidden from one another by the haze, thickened with smoke, that rises between them. It is not, perhaps, an inspiring view across the tall chimneys, municipal towers, and the beetle-backs of several movie-houses; but it does give us a sense of space and a big stretch of sky. The trouble with it, this morning, was that it gave us little else.

Just beneath us lay our lawn and flower-beds; then the hedge which cuts off the vegetable garden. There the rows of beans, peas, and cab-

bages should have run down past a pear-tree on the left, and a plum-tree on the right, until they reached the raspberry and currant department. But they didn't; they began—but about halfway down their proper length they just stopped. Beyond that abrupt edge there was a brown, sandy-looking soil in which a coarse grass grew in large or small patches and lonely tufts. It was dune land, save that it lacked any noticeable hillocks; it stretched on and on, undulating gently into the distance, until it met brownish green hills far away.

We stared out at it in silence for some little time. Then Sylvia said in a choked voice: "Is this some kind of joke, George?"

Sylvia has two reactions to any sort of unpleasant surprise. One is that if it utterly fails to amuse her, it must be some form of joke; and the other is that, whatever it concerns, I must be responsible for it, somehow. I do not pretend to know what she thought I might have been doing in order to spirit away a whole landscape, but I was able to reply with truth that no one could be more surprised than I.

Whereupon she gave a kind of gulp, and ran out of the room.

I stood where I was, still looking out. On the left was the Saggitt's garden, running down alongside our own, and cut off in the same peculiar way. Beyond that was the Drury's—at least, part of theirs; not only was it cut off on a line with ours, but there was no more than a six-foot wide strip of it to be seen; beyond, was the sandy soil.

SYLVIA came back looking frightened. "It's the same in front," she said. "The garden's there, and half the width of the sidewalk—then there's just that stuff; and half the garage has gone."

I raised the window sash and looked out to the right. From that angle I could look down on the garage.

roof. It looked usual enough; then I saw what she meant.

"It's half the Gunners' garage that's gone," I said.

And it had. The roof of their garage climbed to within an inch or two of the ridge, then stopped as if it had been sliced clean off. Where the rest of it should have been—and where the Gunners' house should have been—tussocks of grass waved in a light wind.

"Thank goodness," said Sylvia. Not uncharitably, you understand—but, after all, we had only had our new convertible a couple of weeks.

"We must be dreaming," I said, a little shakily.

"We can't both be," she objected.

That, of course, was debatable, but this was scarcely the moment, so I said: "Well...am I dreaming you, or are you dreaming me?"

I let her have it: I ought to have known better than to ask the question in the first place.

I hurried on some clothes and went outside to see what I could make of it. The front was just as Sylvia had said. I walked down the path, opened the gate, and stepped out on to the half-width of sidewalk. The edge, where the sandy soil began, looked just as if it had been trimmed off with a sharp knife. I bent over to look at it more closely—and caught myself a sharp crack on the head.

It was so unexpected that I recoiled slightly. Then I put up a hand to see what had done it. My fingers met a smooth surface which was neither hot nor cold and seemed as solid as rock. I raised the other hand and felt across several square feet of it. It scared me a bit because, though it was unfamiliar, it was only a step on from the quite familiar. One just had to imagine plate glass with a perfectly non-reflecting surface...

I could not touch the sandy soil and the grass beyond; the transparent wall rose from the very line where normal things ended. As I stood there, looking through

it, I noticed an odd thing: the grass beyond was waving; yet I could not feel even a stir in the air around me.

After a moment's thought, I went to the garage. There I chose my heaviest hammer and found an old can half full of sludgy kerosene. Outside again, I threw the contents of the can at the transparent wall. It was queer the way the stuff splattered suddenly in mid air and began to trickle down; then I took a grip on the hammer, and hit hard. The thing rebounded, and the shaft stung my fingers so that I dropped it; there was no other perceptible result.

When I investigated at the back of the house, I found that the same invisible barrier terminated what remained of the garden—and with increased bizarre effect, for there it appeared to bisect the plum-tree so that, seen from as nearly to the side as I could get, the whole trunk and spread was flat-backed like a piece of stage scenery. I wished I could crane around to see what the devil it looked like from the back, but the wall itself prevented that.

In a rough survey, I estimated that the area of normalcy enclosed by these walls would be an approximate square of seventy yards. Beyond this in all directions stretched the featureless dunes—featureless, that is, save for the hills in the distance which occupied just the same position that hills usually occupied in our view. Not much wiser, I went back to the house.

2



YLVIA, who feels able to face most things better on a cup of coffee, was cursing the cooker for not heating. "Oh there you are. Can't you fix that fuse?"

"Well . . ." I began doubtfully. Then

I went and looked in the box. As I had expected, the fuses were okay; I said so.

"Nonsense," said Sylvia; "nothing goes on."

"On the contrary, quite a lot goes on," I said. "Though just what... Anyway, the point is—where would the power come from?"

"How would I...?" she began. Then she got the idea; she opened her mouth again, failed to find anything to say, and stood looking at me.

I shook my head. "I'll go and see the Saggitts," I said.

It was not that I expected either of the Saggitts to be much help, but one began to have a feeling that some company would be acceptable. Still, I get along all right with Doug Saggitt, although he's quite a bit older than I am—forty-seven, forty-eight, maybe. He's getting thin some places, and gray in others, and though he's not fossilizing yet, it's hard to see why Rose married him—she being only twenty-one, and quite a whistlerouser.

It seems to me that some girls, maybe when they're half-awake one morning, get a kind of nudge from the life-force. 'Hey!' says the life-force. 'Time you were getting married.' 'What, me?' says the girl. 'Sure you—and someone else, of course,' says the life-force. 'But I mean to have a lot of fun first,' says the girl. 'Maybe—but then maybe not,' says the life-force, ominously. 'It could be you'll come out in spots tomorrow, or lose a leg in a car accident, or—'

After it's gone on this way for a bit, it has the girl so paralytic with fright that she flies off wildly, and marries a Doug Saggitt. After a bit, she finds that she doesn't have spots and does have two legs; that she doesn't have a lot of fun and does have Doug Saggitt, and she begins to wonder whether Doug Saggitt was just what the life-force had in mind, after all. Mind you, that's only a theory, but it does save me having to

say 'I can't think why she married him,' the way the rest of the people in the road do every time they see her.

ANYWAY...I went over to their house, and pressed the bell. It looked as if, whatever it was, we and the Saggitts were in it together—and alone, for the transparent barrier on the side beyond them passed through the Drurys' house, including in our area simply the side-wall and a depth of perhaps six inches beyond. It looked extremely dangerous, though it showed no sign of falling. Looking at it while I waited, I reckoned that it, like the plum-tree and the other things the barrier cut across, must be clamped to the invisible surface by a kind of magnetism.

I gave a second long chime on the bell. Presently I heard feet on the stairs. The door opened, and a hand thrust out some coins wrapped in a scrap of writing-paper. It moved impatiently when I didn't accept the offer; the door opened a little more, and Rose's head appeared.

"Oh," she said. "I thought you were the milk. What's the...?" She cut off abruptly; her eyes widened as she saw the view behind me.

"Wh-what's happened?" she stammered.

"That's what I want to see Doug about," I told her.

"He's still asleep," she said vaguely, still staring where the other side of the road ought to be.

"Well..." I began. Then Sylvia came hurrying across.

"George," she said, with a note of accusation. "The gas doesn't work, either."

"Is that surprising? Look where the gasworks was," I said, and pointed away across the dunes.

"But how can I possibly cook breakfast?"

"You can't," I admitted.

"But that's ridiculous; you'll have to do something about it, George."

"Now, what in hell do you suppose I can do?"

Sylvia regarded me, and then turned to Rose with an expression of sisterly suffering. "Aren't men helpless?" she asked, in a voice needing no answer.

Rose was still looking round in resentful bewilderment.

"If you'll rout Doug out, we can at least hold a conference about this," I said.

Sylvia and I waited in the lounge. It wasn't a comfortable wait; Sylvia was doing her hedgehog act—she kind of rolls into a ball of silence, with all the spines sticking out. I used to be the fool terrier in that game, but not now; I don't know which irritates her most.

Doug made his appearance in a dressing-gown, with his chin bristling, and his hair on end—what there was of it. Rose followed; for some reason she had chosen to put on a hostess-gown.

"What the hell's supposed to be going on?" Doug demanded.

"Listen," I said, "before we go any further, will everybody quit barking at me as though I'd done it. You can see what's happened, and you know about as much as I do."

"There's no power, and no gas," muttered Sylvia, aggrievedly.

"And the milkman's late," added Rose.

"Late!" I repeated, helplessly, and sat down.

"Well, if you men won't do anything . ." said Sylvia, and laid hold of the telephone.

I WATCHED, fascinated. Have you ever seen a woman grossly insulted by a perfectly silent instrument? It's good; her mouth clamped, and she marched out of the room with a kind of Amazonian determination to fight something.

There was a pause while I looked at Doug, and he looked at me. At last: "What is going on?" he said bemusedly. He waved a hand at the window. "What is this, George? Where's . . ."

Then he was interrupted by Syl-

via's return. Her eyes were watering slightly, and she was holding a handkerchief to her nose. Her anger had given place to bewilderment; she was even a little scared.

"There's a wall there—only you can't see it," she said.

"Wall—rubbish," said Doug.

"How dare you?" snapped Sylvia, recovering quickly.

Doug went outside to look for himself.

"Now," I said when he came back, "you know just as much as I do. What do we do next?"

There was a pause.

"I'm out of bread, and I suppose the baker won't be coming either," Rose said, miserably.

"I think we've got an extra loaf, dear," Sylvia told her consolingly.

"That's sweet of you, Sylvia—but are you sure you'll be able to spare . . .?"

"For heaven's sake!" I said, loudly. "Here we are with the most amazing, the most monstrous thing happening all around us, and all you two can do is to chatter on about gas and bread."

Sylvia's eyes narrowed a bit, then she remembered that we weren't alone. "There's no need to shout. What do you suggest we do do?" she

"That's not the point—not yet," I said. "The first thing is to find out what has happened; then, maybe we can begin to do something about it. Now has anybody any ideas?"

Apparently nobody had. Doug wandered over to the window and stood there mutely, uninspired by the empty miles of dunes. Sylvia and Rose sat registering womanly forebearance with the male.

"I have a theory," I suggested.

"It'll have to be good," said Doug, gloomily. "Still, let's have it."

"It seems to me that we may be the unwitting subjects of some test or experiment," I offered.

Doug shook his head. "If 'unwitting' means what I think it does, it's

the wrong word. I'm extremely aware of all this."

"What I mean is—someone tried his experiment, and we just happened to be here when he tried it."

"Experiment? ... You mean like letting off an atom bomb or something which just happened to finish everybody but us? Because..."

"I do not," I said, shortly. I went on to make my points. Though all trace of buildings had vanished, the configuration of the ground was roughly the same; we seemed to be in a kind of invisible glass box. Certainly, there were walls all round; and probably, since the air was so still, there was a roof as well—we could test for that later. Everything within the enclosed area was unchanged—everything outside, except the general lay of the land, was altered. Or it might be *vice versa*. Now, the contents of the invisible box were quite alien to the surroundings—it followed that they must have been moved from somewhere to somewhere else. *But* the evidence was that they were still in the same place though it had an unfamiliar aspect. Therefore, as they had not been moved in space, the only other thing they could have been moved in was time.

THIS PIECE of calm, and, I felt, logical reasoning was received with a silence which lasted for some moments. Then Doug said: "If an atom bomb, or several atom bombs, were let off, and we happened to be protected by this glass case or whatever it is . . ."

"Then there certainly wouldn't be grass growing out there," I finished for him. "No. What must have happened is that in some way this enclosed area was twisted through another dimension to another section of time—probably what we would call forward, or to the future. I don't see that anything else could explain the situation."

"H'm," said Doug. "And you think that does explain it, eh?"

There was a pause. Sylvia said con-

versationally to Rose: "My husband reads the most captivating magazines, my dear. All about girls who go through deep space—whatever that is—just in bras and panties. And about good galaxies fighting perfectly horrid galaxies, and the cutest little things called mutants, or robots, or something, and such lovely men who go out on space-patrol for a few hundred light-years at a time. So intriguing. Such interesting titles they have, too. There's *Staggering Stories*, *Stunning Science Stories*, *Dumbfounding Tales*, *Flabbergasting Fiction*, *Bewild*—"

"Listen," I said, coldly. "Maybe you'd like to explain what's going on around here on the hints you've picked up from *Woman's Glamor*, *Clean Confessions*, *Gracious Loving*, *Wolf Tales*, or *Heartbeat Magazine*?"

"At least they have stories in them about things that *could* happen," said Sylvia, equally chilly.

"Euclid said all that was necessary about triangles in his first book—and he got some place with them."

"Well, what place do the stories in your magazines about things that *never could* happen get to?" Sylvia snapped.

"I wouldn't know; what I do know is that one of the 'never coulds' is all around us right now. Look at it! And when I try to understand it, you just sneer."

"Sneer!" said Sylvia. "I like that; I was just explaining to Rose. Why, if anybody was sneering . . ."

"Yes," agreed Rose, decisively, as if answering a question.

We withdrew to our corners for the moment. Doug broke in: "You really think there must have been some fourth-dimensional twist?"

I nodded, glad to get back to the matter in hand. "Well, some other dimensional twist," I agreed. "It must have been that."

"What is a fourth dimension?" asked Rose.

I tried: "It's—well, it's a kind of extension in a direction we can't per-

ceive. Suppose you lived in a two dimensional world, you'd only be aware of length and breadth. And suppose that in your flat country you found a square."

"What of?"

"Nothing; just a square."

"Oh," said Rose, with some reservation.

"Well, that square might really be the bottom surface of a cube—only you wouldn't be able to perceive the rest of the cube, of course. Now if somebody outside picked the cube up and put it down somewhere else it would, as far as you were concerned, vanish suddenly, and then reappear in a different place; you'd be quite at a loss to understand it."

"Well, I certainly am. So what?" agreed Rose.

I WONDERED irritably why anybody marries them. "Don't you see . . . ?" I began patiently. But Sylvia cut in: "We don't. What's more, I don't see that it would make any practical difference if we did."

"Well, not practical, exactly," I admitted.

"All right, then." She turned to Rose. "Haven't you a kerosene stove, dear?" she inquired. Rose nodded, and they went out together.

I looked at Doug, and shook my head.

"The trouble about women . . ." I began.

"Yes, yes," said Doug hastily. "But this theory of yours—are you serious?"

"Of course. What else can it possibly be? I reckon that this section with us in it has somehow been shifted—maybe to several thousand years in the future. It must be the future because it can never have looked like this hereabouts in the past."

"Hard to swallow," said Doug. "I mean it is a bit like one of those magazines Sylvia was talking about, isn't it?"

"It may be," I said irritably. "The thing is that some day, somewhere,

someone is inevitably going to try to raise a bit of the past. I take it that one of the tryers has succeeded—and we happened to be just in the time and place he hit on."

He muttered again about difficulty in swallowing, then he added: "Supposing you are right; what happens next?"

"I imagine someone comes to see how the experiment went off. Quite likely we'll not be able to learn much—they'll be much more advanced. They'll want to know all about us and our times, of course, but that may not be easy. I expect the language will have changed a lot."

"We'll have to draw diagrams of the solar system, and all that?"

"Why?" I said, in some surprise.

"Well, because...oh no, of course—that's when you get to other planets, isn't it?"

IN A SHORT time Sylvia and Rose returned, bearing coffee. The warmth and flavor increased amiability all round. Doug, sipping his, said: "George thinks we're likely to have visitors."

"Where from?" asked Rose, interestedly.

That girl does have the damndest gift for fool questions.

"How . . . ?" I began. Then I stopped; I happened to be sitting facing the window, and I caught sight of a movement way down in the shallow valley. I could not distinguish the cause, but it was clear that something was raising a moving cloud of dust. "It could be they're on their way here now," I said.

We all crowded to the window to look. The thing, whatever it was, showed no great speed, but it was headed our way.

"In George's books they always have huge heads and no hair," said Sylvia reflectively.

"How perfectly horrid," Rose exclaimed, and I thought Doug looked a trifle hurt.

"What sort of things will they want to know, I wonder?" he said. "It'll be a bit like an exam we've not prepared for."

"I'd better go and put on something more suitable," Sylvia said.

"My goodness, so must I," agreed Rose. "And Doug, you *must* brush your hair...and you've not shaved yet."

"You've not shaved, either, George," Sylvia told me pointedly.

"Look here," I said. "Here we are on the brink of one of the most amazing encounters in the whole of history, and what do you think of...? Oh, all right, then."

3



THE MOVING object was still several miles away when I had finished in the bathroom. But I could see it a lot more clearly, now—a long, boxlike contraption with a transparent cover over all catching the

light from time to time. It was not moving much above twenty miles an hour, I judged, but it travelled very smoothly over the rough ground. There was too much dust round the lower part for me to see how it was supported.

I joined Sylvia; she had changed into a blue dress of soft wool which became her well. Her expression of satisfaction over that was modified, however, at the sight of me. "Well, really, George! You can't go around like that."

"What the hell do you use that blade in your razor for, anyway?" I asked.

"You used my . . . ?"

"What else? No power. So cold water, ordinary soap. Your idea, anyway."

Sylvia drew breath, but at that mo-

ment Doug's voice floated up from outside: "Hey! They're just about here, George."

I went down and joined him. We walked the length of what remained of my garden, with Sylvia and Rose following us. Where it ended, we stood close against the invisible wall, watching the vehicle approach. It seemed to be travelling on some kind of millipede-arrangement which compensated automatically for inequalities in the ground. It came to a stop about fifteen yards short of us. The whole side opened towards us on hinges at the base, and came down to form a sort of ramp. Four men inside got up from their seats, walked down the ramp, and stood looking at us.

I was aware of indrawn breaths beside me. "Gosh! What d'you know!" murmured Sylvia's voice.

"Ooh—ooh!" said Rose, as if someone had given her a very large box of candy.

For myself, I didn't see—well, let's be fair. The four men were magnificent specimens, I'll grant. Tall, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, narrow-hipped, and all that—but then, so was Tarzan, and some others. There are other things required of a man beyond a handsome appearance; in fact, some of the best-looking men I have known. . . Anyway, I didn't much care for the way they were dressed, either.

They wore deep yellow tunics, patterned around the edges in brown, belted, and coming down just to knee-length. Their legs were in narrow trousers or gaiters of a brown material, and their thong-fastened shoes were yellow. They wore no hats, and their fair hair had a slightly bleached effect seen above their sunburned faces. Each stood something over six-foot four; the whole effect struck me as slightly stagy.

IT WAS at once clear from the way they looked at us that they were puzzled. They conferred, and then regarded us again. There was some laughter, which I considered ill-man-

nered in the circumstances. With the wall between us, we could not hear the slightest sound of their voices. Once more they debated; then came to some agreement. One went back into the vehicle and emerged with an instrument which looked something like a theodolite. He set it up on a tripod, sighted it, and then pressed a switch on it. Immediately the air around us began to stir, as if the wind were blowing through a gap in the wall. Then, leaving the instrument where it was, all four men began to walk towards us.

I held up my open hand to show that we had peaceful intentions. They looked puzzled. One said to another: "Funny thing, that; I thought Hitler died in 1945?"

I lowered my hand. "Oh! You speak English!" I said.

"Of course," said the nearest man; "why not?"

"Well...er...I thought..." I began, and then gave it up. "My name is George Possing," I told him, introducing myself.

He frowned slightly. "It ought to be Julian Speckleton," he said.

I looked at him. "Really!" I said, coldly; "well, it's not—it's George Possing."

"I don't understand this," he murmured, reflectively.

"It's quite easy. I'm Possing—and I've never even heard of anyone called Speckleton."

"And you're not on the sub-atomic drive?"

I suppose I looked blank.

"The sub-atomic drive that Solarian Rockets are developing," he said, with a touch of impatience.

"Never heard of it—or them," I told him.

"H'm," he remarked. "Something has gone wrong; Paladanov's going to be wild about this."

It occurred to me that I ought to introduce the others; but when I looked, I found it was unnecessary. They were all talking together already. The man with me asked who Doug was. I told him. He asked: "What's the date here?"

When he heard, he whistled. "Thirty-five years out of register. Somebody's going to get a smack for this. Hey, fellers!"

They didn't notice him; one had taken Doug to the gap in the invisible wall, and was showing him something there. The other two were chatting with Sylvia and Rose. Very animatedly, too. Sylvia's eyes were shining brightly. They kept on flicking about the face of the man who was blushing a little. I'd never seen her blush like that before—or look quite that way. I didn't care for it a lot.

"Hey!" said my man, more loudly. The others broke off, and came round him. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sylvia and Rose turn to one another. They giggled like a couple of schoolgirls, and then started whispering.

"Listen," said the man beside me. "Something's gone haywire here; neither of these guys is Speckleton."

THEY ALL regarded us for a moment. "Well, I don't know that I mind that a lot," said one, turning to look at Rose, who blushed.

"Nor me," agreed the other. "Just my climate around here." And Sylvia blushed even more than Rose had.

"Maybe," said my man. "But the point is there's no work for us to do here. No Speckleton; no drawings. These folk come from thirty-five years before."

"I'm not worrying about that a bit," one of the others assured him. "Nice folks," he added. And the girls giggled.

All the same, it's a washout. So what do we do?"

"Wait for instructions," one said, promptly.

"That's so. Then we'll be right on hand when they correct the error," added the other.

"Okay; I'll put a report through." The man turned and walked back towards the vehicle. The man who had been talking to Doug went with him.

Rose, still a little pink, and with a touch of that demureness which isn't meant to deceive anybody, said in a

hostess way: "I'm sure you must be terribly thirsty after all that dust. Won't you have some coffee?"

They had no hesitation at all about accepting the offer. Doug and I were left to watch them push their way through the hedge which separated our gardens, and stroll up, laughing, to his house. We looked at one another.

"Well...!" I said.

Maybe George's years had improved his philosophic outlook. He said, calmly: "I'll have to hand it to you, George; your deductions were dead right."

"Huh," I said, watching the others go into the house.

"Yes. There has been a time transposition, some way. And apparently some kind of hitch in it—so you were right, too, about it just being an accident for us that we're here."

"Huh," I said again. "It might help if I could understand what the hell goes on when there *isn't* a hitch."

"It's not so difficult. That fellow gave me the general idea. You see, in a few years time the offices of the Solarian Rocket Corporation, Inc., will be standing on this site—with a man called Julian Speckleton in charge of the drawing department. Okay? Well, the guys who operate this time-lift dingum just whisk away a part of the block to—er—whatever time it is out there... Just the way we were whisked."

"But what for?"

"Ah that's where these chaps come in. They arrive and photograph all drawings and documents of interest."

"I don't see what for; they must be centuries ahead of us, anyway."

"Sure. But the way they work, they've got a second time-lift in operation some place. Now that brings along some guy called Paladanov. They give him the photographic copies; then they reverse the time-lift, and put things back."

I THOUGHT that over. "I don't see . . ." I began.

"There's a subtlety there," said Doug. "The office block goes back to the split-second it left, so that nothing appears to have been touched. But this Paladanov and his place don't—not quite. It has to be missing from its proper place for a few minutes—long enough for him to collect the photographs so that they are in the house when it goes back."

"This is horribly bewildering."

"Well, if the Paladanov guy went back to the same split-second in which he left, he'd not have the photographs—they weren't in his house at that second, you see."

"I suppose not. But it's so involved; why don't they just whisk up Paladanov here and tell him a few things that'll put him years or generations ahead of his competitors, anyway? Surely that'd be easier?"

"It would be. But would these guys get anything out of it? Somewhere in this, there's a racket; there always is. It could be that Paladanov's employers put money on deposit, and leave it to accumulate, maybe? In that case the more slowly the information is dribbled out, the longer the racket would last... Or it could equally well be that they work the thing the other way round as well, and keep both sides plodding along neck and neck on one another's secrets. That'd be very nice smooth work."

He paused to contemplate the idea admiringly. "I know one thing," he added; "if and when we get back, the first thing I do is to buy my house and ground."

"But, look here," I said. "It's crazy . . . and unpatriotic."

"How? I don't see that an information office in Time—if you can move about in Time—is any more crazy than one in space. Properly operated, it could make big money. As for being unpatriotic, that depends on the distance, doesn't it? The way I see it, to give the Germans radar around 1938 would be bad . . . but to let the Trojans in on the wooden-horse gag wouldn't matter a lot."

"There's no difference in the morals," I said, coldly.

"Maybe they don't have those, anyway," suggested Doug.

"I've been wondering about just that," I admitted uneasily, looking up towards his house. I listened to the sounds coming from there; it seemed to me there was a pretty unnatural amount of high-pitched giggling going on.

"Don't you think we'd better...?" I asked, jerking my head in that direction.

Doug listened, too, for a moment. "Maybe we had," he agreed. We turned, and walked up the garden.

At the door he paused. "Er...pretty big fellows, aren't they...strong looking?" he suggested.

I had to agree with that.

4



SHALL have, I am afraid, to draw a veil over most of the three following days. I never would have believed that two decently brought-up girls...and respectably married too...

Mind you, I didn't take it all lying down; I told Sylvia what I thought about it one time when I did manage to get her alone. Her response wasn't amiable:

"Will you please stop interfering in my affairs?" she demanded.

"But it's your affair that I'm complaining of," I pointed out.

"If you don't like Alaric being a friend of mine, you'd better go and tell him so—and see what he does."

Alaric was, I think, slightly the tallest of the four.

"I don't mind him being a friend of anybody's," I said, "what I mean is . . ."

"Well, what do you mean?" she

asked, dangerously. "Are you accusing him of anything? Because maybe he ought to hear it."

"I'm not talking about him; I'm talking about *you*."

"Well?"

"When a married woman throws herself at another man's head..." I began.

"I thought you said you weren't talking about him?"

"Hell, I'm not; I'm just pointing out..."

"Now, look here," she said. "You're having all the fun of one of your damn silly magazines stories coming true.... So what right have you to interfere in mine?"

"It isn't at all the same sort of thing," I said, shortly. "Anyway, I didn't ask for this; it just happened."

Sylvia softened unexpectedly. "Yes," she said. "That's how love is for women—it just happens," she added, gently.

"That's all very well in those fool stories..." I began.

Her softness suddenly vanished.

"'Fool stories,'" she said. "And from you, too!" she gave an exceedingly unnatural laugh.

"At least mine are harmless and clean," I replied.

"Well, mine always end up most morally; they have to," she countered.

"It's not so much the ending that I'm concerned about at the moment..." I was pointing out when she snapped: "What are you going to do about it?"

She did not seem to understand somehow that the whole conversation was what I was doing about it.

Doug I must admit was more direct in his method of objection—though no more decisive. As I understand it, he had taken Rose over his knee to whang the daylights out of her with a slipper, and the whole thing was going pretty successfully when her friend Damon came in, attracted by her howls. He quietly picked Doug up by his collar and the slick of his pants, and dropped

him out of the window. Then, of course, Rose needed consoling, so the affair really backfired quite a bit.

After that, Doug devoted most of his attention to deciding just how much of the land about us would be (or had been, depending how you look at it) occupied by the Solarian Rocket concern, and considering methods of raising capital.

IT WAS on the afternoon of the third day that the man who had spoken to me first, strode up the garden from their vehicle with a satisfied expression on his face. "They've traced the error," he said. "There was a sticky point in one of the computors which made it run wild now and again, it'll be all okay now."

"I'm glad you think so," I said. It didn't seem to me that a corrected computor was going to set my domestic life to rights again.

"Sure, it will," he nodded. "They'll flip you back to where you came from, and then pull in Speckleton in the Solarian office. I gather Paladanov's been raising hell. As if it mattered; that poor goop will never get it straight that this is time out for him. However long he has to stay here, he can still be returned to within a few minutes of his lift. You, of course, will be returned to the thousandth of a second—pretty close to tolerance, that."

"I suppose so," I said, without zest. "All the same, we've been here three days, and during that time my wife . . ."

"Oh, you'll just have to count that as time out," he said, easily.

"You think so," I remarked. I felt maybe I had better leave that angle. I looked over the near-desert surrounding us. "It'd be kind of nice to know where and when we spent this time out," I suggested. "How did the place get this way?"

"This?" he repeated. "I can't say exactly. It sure caught something, didn't it? That'd likely be during the

Second Atomic War, I guess. Well, I gotta tell the boys we're pulling out; where are they?"

"I wouldn't know, but I could make a goodish guess," I said, bitterly.

DOUG AND I stood on the narrow terrace-path between his house. The scene at the end of my lopped-off garden was not edifying; beyond the invisible wall the four men were now climbing into their vehicle. This side of the wall, Sylvia and Rose stood clinging together, apparently for mutual support. They had handkerchiefs in their hands. Sometimes they fluttered them at the vehicle; sometimes they dabbed them at their faces. We watched the performance gloomily and in silence; we had already repeated all our comments on the situation to one another a good many times.

"Well, at least they're going," said Doug. "I'd begun to wonder if they'd get carried along with us."

"How much longer have we got?" I asked him.

He looked at his watch. "About five minutes," he said.

"Ought we to be doing anything special?"

"No. According to them it just happens."

The vehicle was drawing away now. Sylvia and Rose went on waving, and the men inside waved back. Presently, a couple of hundred yards away the thing stopped. Apparently that was a safe distance. We could see the four heads under the transparent top turned to watch us. The girls were clinging together and still waving.

"Listen," I said to Doug. "I don't quite get this. If everything goes back to a thousandth of a second from where we were, how are we going to remember that it ever . . .?"

My sentence was cut off and I had my answer in the same moment; I found myself sitting up in bed. The light was on, the clock said three-fifteen. Beside me Sylvia was sobbing into her pillow.

I jumped out, and went over to the window.

"We're back," I said.

Sylvia took no notice; she went on crying into her pillow as if she had not heard.

I decided to remove to the spare-room for the rest of the night.

●

"I shall go and see Groves this afternoon," I announced at breakfast.

Sylvia looked up. She was not at her best this morning.

"I shall be seeing him about divorce proceedings," I amplified.

She stared at me, rallied, and came back absolutely true to form. "Is this some kind of a joke?"

"Joke! Is that what you call your behaviour?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

I looked hard at her; she didn't even blink. "Look here," I said, "you're not going to pretend to me that you don't remember your own disgraceful behavior?"

"Are you trying to insult me?" she asked, coldly.

"I've got witnesses, remember. The Saggitts will bear me out."

"How interesting, George. About what...and where...and when?"

"Well, of all the barefaced..." I began.

Sylvia shook her head reprovingly. "Perhaps I should be angry, but I'll forgive you, George."

"You'll forgive me!"

"Well, it's hardly fair to hold a person responsible for what he dreams, is it? I expect it has something to do with all those absurd stories you read just before you go to sleep. Now if you were to try reading stories about things that could really happen, George..."

WHEN I SET out for the office everything appeared utterly normal: you'd never believe that anything the least unusual had hap-

pened to the place. When I looked carefully at the sidewalk I fancied I could trace the hairline of a crack, but I couldn't be sure even of that.

Doug came out of his front door just as I was passing. "Hello, George." He looked around at the familiar scene. "It's Wednesday," he remarked. "I checked on the phone...and yesterday was Tuesday. And yet we've had three days in between. Queer, isn't it?"

"I'm glad to hear you say it," I told him; "I was just beginning to wonder if I *am* crazy."

He cocked an eye at me. "So that's what she's been telling you. Funny, so has mine."

We regarded one another.

"It's—it's collusion or conspiracy or something," I said.

"Possibly," Doug agreed. "But I don't see what we can do about it. I recommend a good spanking...one wouldn't be interrupted this time."

"Er... I don't think Sylvia..." I began.

"Worth trying. Works wonders," Doug advised. In a different tone of voice, he went on: "I'm just going to start up some tentative inquiries about this property. Are you on?"

For me, the whole recollection was becoming more and more like the dream Sylvia said it was, but Doug

"Give me a few days," I suggested.

"Okay; no hurry," he agreed as our ways parted.

I very nearly dropped out of it. There was such a solidarity of opinion between Sylvia and Rose; and the whole occurrence did seem increasingly fantastic in retrospect... When I looked at Sylvia now, I really couldn't imagine...

But fortunately an announcement in a local paper caught my eye a week or so later. It said To Emmeline, wife of Alfred Speckleton, a son, Julian.

